

Stockholm Syndrome: An Excuse for Love

by Wood Chips

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Summary: After the botched assault on an enemy base, Major Victoria Clay is held hostage by Covenant Elites. While trying to sort out her growing feelings for a friendly prison guard, the aliens around her struggle to keep peace within their own ranks. When barriers break, life for everyone in the compound turns for the worst; leaving everyone to fight for their very lives.

1. Capture

****A/N:**

>Hey, there, readers. This story is a revamp of a story I had stopped working on about two years ago (just titled Stockholm Syndrome). I had stopped writing is because of crippling family issues, but everything has recently resolved itself and I am PUMPED to rework and finish this adventure. I am very sorry that it took so long for this to continue, as I know there were a good amount of people who liked the story.
If it happens that you had already read the original, I want to just get it out there that there are going to be some significant changes in the story; mostly the addition of some sub-plots, better character development, some minor plot tweaking, and an overall slower pace (upon rereading, I felt that everything seemed a bit rushed before). The rating has also been boosted to M, but for violence and language reasons ****only****.
>Well, enough of my ramblingsâ€¦ Please read and enjoy.

{2552-10-15}

The hot desert sun beat down upon the small platoon rested along the face of a tall sand dune. There were four members, all clad in matching taupe uniforms. They sat side-by-side, reclined on the slanting surface of the mound of shifting sand. Each member had black goggles, fit for protection from the harsh sunlight and airborne sand. One of the people, situated at the left of the line, pulled a pair of binoculars from a bag from their side. Flipping on to their belly, the soldier, in a soft toned, feminine voice spoke.

"I'll check the base."

>A small, worn nameplate above her right breast labeled her simply; Clay.<p>

The three others nodded and the woman crawled to the top of the sand dune. On her back was a high caliber rifle, its long barrel rising well above her head, the matted tan paint on its surface preventing a glare. Silently, Clay thanked the sun for finally moving behind the group. The heat on their backs was uncomfortable, but they needed all of the vantage they could get. Lifting up the binoculars, she peered over the peak of the hill. In her eyesight was a small, dome shaped building surrounded by a sturdy concrete wall. The wall was rectangular, and cast heavy shadows on the objects within its perimeter. It was very different from the usual bright colors and fluid shapes of normal Covenant architecture. It was made for being inconspicuous and sturdy. Nothing more, nothing less.

The sight of the old war style bunker was almost relieving. It brought back a slight wave of nostalgia, of times not so long ago when the only wars humans ever fought were with each other. Clay may have been very young when the Covenant had made itself known; but she could recall evenings at home watching the news, where the top stories were of the struggles within the human race.

Snapping back to the present, Clay continued to survey the area. The thick outer wall made for an easily maneuvered pathway for the four guards stationed on each corner of the barricade. How they could stand on one place, in the heat all day was beyond her. All of them were Elites, suited head to toe in glistening azure armor. They were armed, but unaware. Weapons were either holstered or held loosely. They were completely oblivious of her presence. Clay would guess they even had their safeties on, if Covenant weapons even had them.

>After getting badly scorched by an overheated plasma pistol a few years back, she had vowed not to touch alien weaponry again; not wanting to risk another accident. Even after an intense healing regimen she was left with scars; thin, pink tendrils and patches on her palm and undersides of all fingers on her right hand.
Smiling, the scout returned to her team. She slid back into her previous position, and turned to face the others.

>"They have no idea we're here. Get your gear ready, it's time to attack."<p>

Smiling, the others began to slide their own rifles from their backs. Opening their chambers, they filled up the needed space for ammunition, and they all made sure scopes and barrels were debris-free. One large built man, who finished preparing earlier than the others, crossed over the two soldiers to his left, and made his way over to the only woman in the platoon. He sat up straight, and smiled goofily. His broad chin was covered in bristle, and the small patch on his breast read "Kipp". He lifted the issued goggles to his sweat-beaded brow, revealing a pair of striking emerald eyes.

>"So ya ready to kill some alien bastards?" His Australian roots were very apparent in his speech.
Patting the weapon leaned on her shoulder, the Clay returned his childish grin.

"Well, _Lieutenant_, I have only been waiting for this time forâ€| how long have we been stationed here? Two weeks!"

>Gregory Kipp let out a hearty laugh, and couldn't help but proudly

glance at the golden bar stitched onto the upper arm of his uniform; he had worked hard for his rank. Looking over at his comrade, though, he knew that she worked much harder for hers. On her arm was the gold, leaf-like symbol of the Major. The woman in front of him had killed more mother's children- if their foes could even be labeled as such- than he would dare to count. Her precision with a sniper rifle was unmatched, and her careful planning usually left no room for error. A fond memory he held in mind of his female friend was during a deployment in a thick jungle terrain; during which she deftly scoured the treetops, taking out perched Jackals either by bullet or hand.
"Major Clay?" A male voice rung out from behind Kipp's hulking figure, and the major peeked out from behind him.

>"Yes?"
"We're ready to go." He shifted the rifle in his hands, and the final member of the group nodded in agreement.

Clay cleared her throat, her face erased of relaxation and replaced with authority,

"Good. Now a quick review. One wall guard per person, hit the one most direct to your position. These guys will react to the initial firing pretty fast, so hit the soldiers as they come out. The base is fairly small, so they will have, at tops, twenty more inside. It seems like most, or all, of the Elites here are already outside. If any more emerge, target them first. It'll be best to disrupt the chain of command.

>" Take them out as you see them, and don't let them get near us. At the event of a close encounter, use your SMG's. We'll sweep the area after the assault. Ready, guys?"<p>

Nodding, the team of snipers began to climb up the dune. Kipp gave his commanding officer a crooked grin as she advanced, admiring her immediate transition from playful friend to hardened soldier. He never seemed to be able to break from his own goofy demeanor with stride, like she did all the time.

>"Hey, Vic. Just make sure to leave some Covvies ffor the rest of us, ok?"
"I can't make any promises." A smile managed to cross her face as Kipp scooted ahead of her on the climb.

Victoria was a name the major would never have picked for herself. It was much too elegant for her likes, and it felt too regal when spoken aloud. She had always insisted on being called Vic. Even though it was much more boring than the name's full form, the normality of the sound made her feel like she belonged with the other soldiers.

They all lined up at the peak of the dune, Kipp's form easily dwarfing his three comrades. Usually people of his stature preferred a station with more up-close combat, but his eyes were that of an eagle, and his trigger finger always had an itch that could never be satisfied. Even with the large size differentiation, he always viewed himself as no more, and no less, than the lean and nimble assassins that he fought alongside.

>In unison, the soldiers removed their goggles, and took aim through their respective scopes. The rifle barrels were long and heavy, and the stands supporting them were slowly sinking into the churning sand. If they had taken the time to set up sandbags, they would have been spotted for sure.
"On my mark, menâ€|" Vic said as she drew a breath.

>Her sight was on the enemy closest to her, and as she saw him turn his head, revealing a fleshy gap in his armor. Her muscles tensed as

she steadied her weapon.
"Now."

>Four gunshots rang out in unison, but even before the bodies hit the ground, a fifth, then sixth crack was heard. They were not from human weapons. Vic flinched as warm liquid splashed her jaw, and she pushed backwards, falling behind the safety of the dune's face.<p>

They never could have seen it coming.

Falling back into safety, three stunned soldiers lay silently on their torsos. Vic grimaced as she looked to her side, Kipp was injured, and one of the other men, Matthews, was dead. From where they were, all that could be seen was the back end of his limp corpse. Vic has seen, in the short seconds of her retreat, the extent of his wound. Being a sniper's round, it hadn't cauterized as much as plasma weapons usually did, instead leaving a bloody mess on the sand. The remaining soldier was unharmed, but a bit shaken. He was young, and fairly new to high-risk combat. Eyeing Kipp, Vic surveyed the wound. He had been hit in the left crook of his neck, and he grasped the entry wound with his opposite hand. Crimson blood pulsed out from between his fingers in rapid beats.

>"Greg? Are you alright?"
"Just a flesh wound! I'll be fine!"
Through his attempted humor was obvious pain and fear.

Kipp had been hit by small explosions and shrapnel in the past, but this was his first serious injury. A searing, throbbing pain stream-lined through his neck was left where the projectile had sliced clean through his flesh. It may not have hit its exact mark, but the damage done was all but inefficient. Most of the blood was exiting where it had entered, but there was a decent sized pool forming at the back collar of his uniform. The projectile had gone through and through, just missing his spine.

>Looking at the shaken man behind her wounded comrade, Victoria lifted her rifle, and prepared to climb the hill again.
"Williams!" He jumped at the sound of his name. "What are you doing just sitting around? Patch this man up, now!"

"Y-yes ma'am!" Yanking out some medical supplies from his pack, Williams began to treat Gregory's neck.

Victoria began to edge up the slope, knowing full well that her friend's life was second to the succession of their mission; and she hated it. She had no experience with patching wounds anyway, so there wasn't much else she could do for Kipp. He was in the most capable hands they had, at the moment.

"Goddamnit!" She heard from behind, "Why did we have to drop the fuckin' medic?" She didn't dare look back to her team.

>Their platoon had a wonderful record, and every mission they had been deployed on had been executed without fail, or even injury. It was decided that a professional medic was not needed, and that keeping one with the team was just a waste; and since their newest member had basic medical training, no one objected. This was, of course, their first mission without a seasoned medic. Vic found the irony nearly sickening.<p>

As she reached the summit of the dune, the major readies her rifle, and placed the scope to her eye. She had to make the shot quick, before the opposite sniper had a chance to fire. Scooting up to the peak, she quickly scanned over the shadows in the confines of the base, but to no avail. Then, after a second sweep, a flicker of light

caught the major's eye. As she focused in on the flash, she could begin to make out the figure in the dense shade. Active camo. As the guise faded, she could make out the sniper, an ugly toothy Jackal, staring down the scope of a sleek rifle, poised directly at her. At any other time, she would have wondered at the oddity of a Jackal with such advanced equipment. Vic froze up, and no shot came. Her sights weren't lined up just right, and one move would trigger hostile fire. Still looking through the scope, her enemy slowly raised his left hand and waved.

>'Goodbye.'

Then, just as he pulled the trigger on his streamlined weapon, Vic jerked back behind the dune. A shimmering round flew straight through where her head had been barely a second before. She lifted herself up again, just below where he could see her. At least she knew his position. She drew in a deep breath, then rose over the peak, swiftly firing three rounds at the sniper's location. She ducked back immediately, but only heard the sound of metal making contact with concrete. For a second, she thought she had missed and hit the wall, so she looked up, only to see she had hit her intended area, but her target had fled.

"Shit."

Vic knew he was off reporting this incident to his superiors. They had planned for a clean termination of all stationed guards. Instead, they had one dead comrade, one wounded, and who knows how many stealth soldiers lurking in the shadows. This place was not at all what their observations and intel suggested. They would have to head back to camp, or they would be dead for sure. Sliding back down the slope, Vic didn't face her comrades until she had reached the base of the hill, afraid to see another dead soldier at her feet. This was a mistake on her part, because as she turned, she was not met with two people, but six. The major froze, staring into the faces of four well armed towering aliens. No matter how many times she had seen them, Vic was always intimidated by the sheer mass of the elites. At their smallest, they were still almost three heads taller than Kipp, and much broader.

She was in no position to reach for her holstered weapons, not with two of the aliens pointing highly volatile plasma weapons at her head. The remaining Elites had her comrades on their knees, the barrels of their guns pressed into the backs of their skulls. The one on Kipp raised his free hand to the side of his head, and spoke; into a comm. link, Vic assumed. Not that she could decipher any of his alien garble, though.

>Her heart was pounding. Never before had she been in such a terrifying position. She couldn't take out even one of them at this close range, no matter no matter how hard she could fight. Vic looked to her men, and felt ashamed that her leadership had led them into this. Both men looked just as scared as she felt. Glancing over at Kipp's wound; Vic felt a short sense of pride in viewing the newbie's handiwork. He patched up the hole nicely.<p>

The aliens were now babbling amongst themselves, and then one began to advance towards her in long equal strides. Before she could react, the butt of his weapon made hard contact with the side of her face. She only had time for a fleeting thought before her world was plunged into black.

'If they wanted us dead, they would have just killed us...
Right?'

2. Incarceration

{2552-10-15}

Special Operations Officer K'hall Sahnkaee slouched silently in a form-fitting floating chair situated in his personal quarters. He started blankly at the flickering streams of data flowing through the large screens in front of him. Always, there is work. It was all too bad that his mind could only focus on the regrettable events that just took place under his command. Four Sangheili had died today. It was not the fact that they died which troubled the Officer, but the manner in which it happened. They were taken out at a distance by human snipers, not even given the opportunity to fight back. His brothers deserved a more honorable demise. He had checked through his intel dozens of times, but still nothing that could have alerted them to human presence. What was the point of being here if they could not even spot the enemy?

Internally, he was grateful of Mar'lech, the Kig-yar sniper who had been able to alert the compound during the attack. Recently, tensions had been high between their two species. The rising political ambitions of the Jiralhanae had been slowly pushing them as a species in Covenant hierarchy, and the Kig-yar had seemed more than accepting of their slow push to try and succeed over the Sangheili. The small avian creatures were pirates and thieves by nature, and the hulking furry brutes had apparently been seen as fiscally better allies. The actions of Mar'lech put K'hall's mind at ease in that retrospect. He was able to take out one of the humans, albeit a bit too late, but it was still something. It proved the new arrival's competency and that was enough to satiate the war-hardened Sangheili.

>Focusing back on the data, he decided that this time was better spent alerting his superiors of the ambush. He deftly worked the holographic keys on his machine, working together a detailed report of the incident. He paused, receiving a verbal confirmation via comm. link of a successful detainment from the Sangheili dispatched to deal with the humans. K'hall responded with an order to have the human brought to the cell block, and as unharmed as possible. After ending the transmission, he absently wondered if human psyches are fragile as their bodies.
The Officer then finished his summary quickly, sending the final draft without any regrets; even though he had listed the human casualties as 4/4.

* * *

><p>Vic awoke to the soft scraping of her booted heels cutting through the sandy ground. She felt both physically and mentally exhausted. It took her a few tries to successfully open her eyes, and she was met with a blur of various shades of yellows and browns. Her vision cleared, and she looked up, seeing the sand dune where she had been perched not too long ago; now far in the distance. The sun pierced her retinas, and she shut her eyes again, allowing her body to orient itself. Her entirety was limp, her chin propped up on her collarbone and lolling up and down with each step. Her arms were wrapped uncomfortably behind her back, with wrists shackled together with some sort of energy-based handcuff. She felt the texture against her feet suddenly change, as she was pulled onto a concrete floor.

She peered out once more, just at the fortified gates of the Covenant base's outer walls closed with a deep thump.
"I can walk, you know." Her voice came out hoarser, and weaker, than she anticipated; just how long had she been out?

Either her captor didn't hear her, or didn't care. Hell, for all she knew, he didn't even understand English.

>Knowing there was not much she could do; Vic allowed herself to be pulled along. She could hear, ahead, the other Elites' heavy steps. They probably had Kipp and Williams. The door to the base itself opened with a grinding sound, and the group was met with a blast of cool air. It was physically shocking in comparison to the heavy heat of the desert.
The hallway was eerily vacant. It seemed like they had already traversed the length of the small building, but they had yet to encounter anyone else. The party halted. The Elite dragging Vic turned around and wrenched her upright, speaking in deep rumblings a command she could never have understood. She didn't dare turn around, and stood in silence. Her hip felt awfully light, and Vic peered down, only to see a vacant spot where her sidearm should have been. She was disappointed, but not at all surprised. The Covenant weren't stupid, after all.

Looking past her empty holster, Vic noticed the section of floor they stood on was different than the rest of the concrete complex. It was a deep violet, and consisted of the familiar sweeping designs so common in Covenant architecture. She scrutinized the floor for a moment, when her stomach dropped. The fluorescent floor had quickly descended with a static swish, bringing them into a high ceilinged underground room. It was rounded in shape, built around the single elevator that delicately touched down to the lower level. There were numerous hallways branching from this epicenter, with hordes of Covenant soldiers going this way and that from section to section. Victoria was slightly stunned by the influx of activity. There had been nothing above to even hint to such a stronghold. Even in they had cleared out the outer guards as planned, the mission would have still flopped.

>With a rough nudge, she was walking forward; being kept in the front of the pack. Never having been inside a Covenant structure before, Vic took in every detail she could. There were no stairs, only sweeping ramps of rich violet that connected the two floors. And the violet. Yes, it came in different shades, some more red or blue than others, but it was everywhere. The ceilings, the floors, even the holographic screens on datapads and computer screens were all saturated in the hue. Combined with the fluid designs and rounded edges of near everything, it was almost like stepping into another reality.

>The group entered a hallway, and began to maneuver into the edges of the structure. The people around became less and less as they traversed. She memorized the route they took, each and every turn. If there was even a chance of escaping, she was going to permanently etch the way in her mind.<p>

The cell block was empty. No men on duty, no prisoners in cells. It was small, with only six cramped cubicles; three on each side of the corridor. After the last pair of rooms, the hall abruptly ended. Each cell was open, and they had no physical doors. Inside, they were all identical: purple metal on all sides save the opening, and a bench jutting out of the far wall.

>Vic was directed to the middle room on the right side. Feeling internally grateful that the Elites weren't giving her much trouble,

she obediently stepped inside. As
soon as she crossed the threshold, one of the Elites erected a humming energy wall over the doorway; effectively sealing her in.

* * *

><p>Special Operations Minor Zaynne 'Cgaknaee made his way through the familiar installment. Maroon armor glistened under the artificial azure lighting, and a four fingered hand rested casually on the deactivated handle of his prized sword. Bronze eyes peeked through the just narrow enough slits in his sleek helmet. Life had been slow for him over the past weeks in the installment. Being in such a desolate remote desert, on an equally desert and remote planet, which was in an even more desolate and remote pocket of the nebula didn't make for much excitement. The only place with any significant activity was a Forerunner excavation site, which was a three days journey from this outpost. This base in the desert had been a preemptive idea, to spot enemy activity. There were many similar structures dotted around the far perimeter of the main site, all large underground facilities. There were many researchers in each base, being fed constant information from the dig site. Which is why, to Zaynne's slight annoyance, the Sangheili were in the minority. Science and works of the mind were not something his race took fondly to, and his kind was mostly here just for armed support.
Now that there was finally something to do other than patrol, he was ecstatic. When news of the human prisoner had reached him, he had volunteered for guard duty. Guarding the enemy would be much more exciting than baking in the desert sun, or making monotonous rounds through the compound's halls.

>Approaching the only cell block in the building, he was met with the sight of three of his brothers; just as one guided the human captive into her designated room. The energy shield that served as a translucent door activated with the press of a button, and his fellow Sangheili turned. Leaving the human without a word, they met Zaynne halfway in the corridor.
"Greetings, brother." One spoke, bowing his head.

>Zaynne returned the gesture and then motioned to the closed cubicle.
_"Do you any information about the human?"

>The information he had received from his superior was oddly sparse about the whole situation. The warriors exchanged disgruntled looks, and one nervously shifted his position.

>"There seems to be a problem with it."

* * *

><p>Vic sat in the only structure in the cell, a hard metal bench. It was large enough to comfortably fit an Elite, and she silently wondered why they would need one this size; the only enemies they have are humans. Curling her legs to her chest, Vic slid her arms under her buttocks; moving them to the front of her body. Trying to undo the binds would probably do much more harm than good, so she had no plans of trying that. She just wanted her arms and shoulders as comfortable as possible in what could be a lengthy stay. Not too far away echoed the grumblings of alien speech, and Vic shamelessly eavesdropped. Sure, she may not be able to understand the words, but raw emotion could always be deciphered from any language.
There was intrigue, hesitancy, then worry mixed with confusion. The conversation abruptly ended after that, and was followed by the sounds of both approaching and receding footsteps.

>Then, another Elite entered into her line of sight. The first thing

she noticed was the style of his armor. Sweeping contours and the light, form fitting nature of it brought back rather unpleasant memories.<p>

She had dealt with another Elite in similar armor in the past, but that of a jet black color. He had been under active camo when he sprung from behind a cargo crate, energy sword poised for her torso. She had strafed to the side, the searing blade only catching her slightly at the hip. Vic had eventually won the fight with the help of another soldier, the Elite having been tagged by a stolen plasma grenade. As soon as the thing had latched on, the alien roared and charged at the offending human. He was too far away, and died alone in a spew of blue.

Looking at this new Elite, Vic half expected him to disappear in a haze of liquid mirror. He, of course, didn't. Instead, she stood facing her cell, scrutinizing her as much as she was him. She could tell he noticed the slightly less restrained position of her arms, but didn't seem to care enough to comment on it. Oddly, she didn't mind his staring. There was nothing hostile in his gaze; he was just observing. After a few minutes, he looked her straight in the eyes, and gave a disappointed sigh.

>"I was under the impression that humans are much more interesting when held captive." His voice was deep and rumbling, the syllables of each word pronounced with perfect precision.
Vic's eyebrows rose. So, he was the friendly type. She could go along with that, but the retort that immediately popped into her head seemed a bit sharp-tongued for a first impression. She went with something more lighthearted instead; there was no need to piss off the guy with the gun&| and _sword_.

>"I'm sorry to disappoint. It's just that I don't fit into the 'raging primate' demographic of humanity. They seem to be the majority nowadays." Vic just hoped he took it as a joke.
_

>She took his resulting bellowing chuckle as an affirmative on that. He took a step forward, and yet again scanned her up and down.

>"Being humorous with a Sangheili; you truly must be broken, human."

>Sangheili. Why was that word so familiar?
Ah, yes; the real name of the Elites. Vic would have to keep that word in mind now that she was surrounded by the creatures.

>"You know, being so friendly with a human is equally as strange."
"I have found myself in the unfortunate position of having nothing better to do than supervise you, and I figure that future time may move quicker without awkward silences as a result of war-bred hostility."

>Jeez. He could have gotten the point across in a much simpler way.
"I've never been on equal grounds with any Covenant before."

>"Nor have I with any of Humanity."
She studied his eyes for a moment. Though alien and predatory, they seemed to hold no ill will. Vic wondered if, like humans, the Sangheili's windows to the soul were the eyes.

>"Well, I suppose it's good to be on friendly terms with someone; even if it isfor their own convenience."

Everything seemed much less strained from then on. After the truce between the pair, Zaynne and Vic made actual introductions. Over the next half hour or so of small talk, Vic had quickly become used to

calling the warrior by name. Zaynne, though, seemed more hesitant in that aspect. 'Human' seemed to be his favored title for her, only once using 'Victoria'; as if to test the feel of the word. Apparently he didn't like it too much. Their conversation then died quickly, Vic having to give into the throes of fatigue. She settled down awkwardly on the bench and slept.

>Hours later, she was awoken by a baritone voice.
"Human, arise."

>As she regained consciousness, there was a heavy feeling in her stomach. She seemed to be encompassed in dread. As she tried to piece together just why that was, the nightmare from moments ago abruptly wiped itself from her memory. The terrible feeling dissipated along with it, leaving her majorly aggravated and confused. Hearing a soft swish, Vic looked up to see Zaynne standing in the now open doorway.

>"Come now, human, swiftly. I am sure you wish to be a part of your negotiations for release."
Immediately, the curiosity about her nightmare was pushed aside. Those musings could wait until she had secured her freedom.

3. Negotiation

{2552-10-15}

With Zaynne keeping a swift pace at her side, the trek down to the communications room gave Vic the unwanted time for nervous contemplation. She let the ideas flow through her mind of what she could possibly be worth, but didn't come up with much of anything. Aside from a trade with another PoW, which was unlikely given the general attitude of the enemy, all she could think of was maybe the transfer of her for a non-military grade Forerunner artifact. That was, of course, considering that the UNSC would even take her back. She wasn't all that important in the scheme of things, and if the Covenant demanded too much for her freedom; well, she was probably as good as dead.

>Another thought that nagged at her brain was the peculiarity of the whole situation. Covenant weren't known for regularly taking prisoners. Yet here she was, safe and sound; there were even negotiations going on. Vic had lived nearly her entire life through this war, and she couldn't pinpoint one time when the enemy did such a thing. She wouldn't complain though, for she owed this odd situation her life. If they hadn't captured her, she would be taking a permanent nap in the sand outside.<p>

* * *

><p>While the position of his eyes gave him phenomenal side vision, Zaynne still had to glance around every few seconds to keep the human in his sights; simply because of their size discrepancy. She obediently kept to his flank, hands repositioned behind her back. He could not deny that he enjoyed being around her, for whatever reason that may be. It could be because she was the first civil human he had come across, or the respect he held for her after hearing of her capability in battle from his fellow Sangheili. Whatever it was made him overall accepting of her handicap as a human, and tolerant of her actions. But wouldn't she have to be disruptive for him to be tolerant?

>Her placid behavior, in general, slightly unnerved him. She was too calm, accepting, and unfazed about her situation. While he

appreciated her overall friendliness, it was just not right. Perhaps his brothers that had initially retrieved Victoria were correct in their assessment of her: that something in her mind was missing.

>Coming across their destination, Zaynne just hoped he was not around when it was found.<p>

* * *

><p>The two stopped at a guarded door in the middle of a quiet hallway. Two imposing Elites stood at each side of the entrance. Why the Covenant would need guards on duty within their facility, Vic could only guess. One of the soldiers spoke to Zaynne in rough garbled syllables. A nod was given in response, and the guard opened the door.<p>

The place inside was faintly reminiscent of a UNSC war room. A single table made up the bulk of the area, littered with datapads and miscellaneous items. A hologram projector was mounted on the table's center, currently displaying a map of the galaxy. There were two pulsating blips on the image; one Vic recognized as the star system that they were in at the moment. The other, which was significantly far from the first, she could not identify at all. At the far end of the room was a series of monitors, the central most featuring the grim looking face of a war-hardened human. Silhouetted before the screen was a massive Elite, clad in intricately designed armor.

>The soft nudge of a hand ushered Vic into the dim room. Instinctively looking back, she noticed that she had changed escorts. One of the guards had switched off with Zaynne, leaving Vic with only a sparing glance as the door sealed behind her. She made it about mid way into the space when the Elite guiding her stopped, possibly waiting for a signal from the other alien at the console. Standing here, they were able to catch the tail end of the interspecies conversation; initially hearing the human in mid-sentence.
"â€|guarantee their safe arrival."
>"We have an agreement then?"
"Only after you give me a show of good faith." The human, a Colonel by what his uniform suggested, crossed his arms.

The commanding Elite slightly turned his head, a bright yellow iris eyeing Vic. He waved them over with a hand, and her guard led them onward. The monitor featuring the other human seemed muted in comparison to her current surroundings. Everything, including the Colonel, seemed gray and lifeless. It seemed like even the air would smell stale.

>When she came in view of the screen's camera, the Colonel looked visibly disappointed; as if he had been hoping this was all an elaborate ruse. The automatic reaction to salute him was halted by her bindings, and she gave a respectable nod to her superior instead. The Colonel seemed to study her for a moment.
"Well, shit... We'll be at the coordinates in three days. The major must be in the same condition she is now, or the deal is _off_."

>The least he could have done was acknowledged her. Vic suddenly didn't regret her inability to salute.
"Your human will remain unharmed. And if you fail to uphold your end of this bargain, I shall slay her myself."

>As the transmission abruptly ended, Vic couldn't help but notice the lack of anxiety she had to the Elite's very real threat. She supposed if you heard one death threat, you have heard them all. And even

though she was still privy to almost no information, she was put at ease by the promise of her safekeeping.
She seemed to be utterly disregarded as the only two aliens in the room spoke in foreign words.

>The soldier that led her in eventually grew frustrated; suddenly pulling her to the door, after what she could only guess was a barking order from his superior to leave. Faster than Vic could realize, she was handed back to the waiting Zaynne, and on her way to the cell block.<p>

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A silence that had accumulated on their returning travel immediately broke as the cell door was erected. Zaynne had hidden his curiosity well on their walk, but speaking now, his voice betrayed his emotions.

>"What did the Officer and your people decide upon?"
Vic paused, allowing herself the time to sit down and rearrange her arms before she spoke.

>"I'm honestly not all that sure. All I know is that I'm probably getting released in three days, and that my people are very adamant about my safety."

>"You are unaware of what will be given in return for you?"
"They kept me in the dark about that."

>He seemed disappointed, and let the conversation drop. Vic wished he hadn't, because she now found that she wanted an excuse to hear his voice. Her brief interaction with another human had reminded her of just how boring her species usually sounded. It was true that she had not even been held in this facility for a day, but hearing the Colonel speak had put her off slightly. The way Zaynne spoke, along with his whole species, seemed to have layers of complexity woven in to each syllable. Their deep, rumbling voices and sophisticated pronunciations gave every word a deeper, more profound, meaning. She felt that listening to Zaynne was like being spoiled by a regal vernacular. She edged forward the
conversation, even if just to get him to speak again.

"I noticed something kind of strange, during the negotiationsâ€¦ There was only one Eli- er, Sangheili, in the room. At least, that's strange from my experience; for one person alone to make decisions of this sort of caliber."

>Zaynne remained close to the cell door, tapping a long finger on its shifting surface. He heavily sighed, and slightly turned away. With one eye still trained on her, he spoke softly.
"Times have been trying for my people as of late, and I fear I am unable to give any insight on Officer Sahnkaee's actions. I trust in both his decision to deny a council and his settlement regarding this situation, and shall not question him."

Vic internally cursed herself; that definitely struck a nerve. Before she was able to compile a response, he spoke again; his solemn tone suddenly gone.

>"The hour is late, human. Do you require any previsions for the night?"
The question struck her by surprise.

>"I guess if you have a spare pillow or something that would be great. Oh, and would it be possible to remove these cuffs? It's not like I'm going to stage a break out, or anything; I value my life too much to do something stupid like that."
Zaynne was facing her again, and seemed amused by her words. With a brief chuckle, he spoke.

>"Forgive my people, as we are not used to such behavior. One of my kind would have either escaped or terminated himself by this time. Humans act so differently. Come here, so I may remove the bindings."<p>

Another pleasant surprise, Vic hadn't expected him to comply so easily. After gaining the knowledge that she was safe, a breakout was the farthest thing from her mind. Sitting herself up, she walked to the cell entrance. With a low swish the door fizzed out, and she raised her wrists, so that Zayne could undo the shackles.
>"Yeah, I heard about stuff like that. Humans are usually more in to self preservation than being martyrs."<p>

Zayne had stepped closer, and raised both hands to deactivate the handcuffs. Vic felt utterly dwarfed by his size, but was not bothered by it. His hands engulfed her wrists as he worked with the device. He seemed to be having trouble with the cuffs, grunting in annoyance as he fiddled with the controls.
>Being so near him, Vic took the time to study. Glancing up, she looked at his face. Slit pupils on a backdrop of bronze focused on their task, unaware of her stare. His four mandibles were slightly agape, revealing rows of sharp, predatory teeth. Zayne steadily breathed, sending wispy waves of heat down upon her face. She could make out both fine and thick scars across exposed patches of skin round his brow and mouth. His armor covered mostly everything else, and Vic absently wondered how many more testaments to battles survived he held on the rest of his body.<p>

"I have heard of humans becoming nearly suicidal in similar situations. Depending on what is at risk, I believe both of our species may be inclined to act similarly."
>Being so close, his voice sounded like a low instrument. Vic could not only hear, but feel his words.
>"I guess it just shows you how we are all, in the end, just smart animals. Not too different in the scheme of things."
There was a click, and her shackles were unlocked. Zayne paused for a moment; hands wrapped around the bindings, and Vic's wrists still held in place. Her neck craned up to see his face, which was in turn lowered to look at hers. Their eyes locked, and she could have sworn that his cat-like pupils slightly dilated.

As quickly as the moment started, Zayne ended it. He took a long stride backward, taking the handcuffs with him as he withdrew. With a touch, the cell door materialized, and he sighed.
>"I fear, Victoria, that there are many differences between our two races; some of them more substantial than others."
Hearing her name in what could have possibly been a _very_ sentimental sentence put Vic off, and she was stunned.
>He continued seamlessly, "I must take my leave now, as my shift has ended. I will instruct the night guard to obtain you a cushion, and shall return in the morning."
Turning, he began to walk away. Before he left her line of sight Vic spoke, just loud enough for him to hear.
>"Alright then. Good night, Zayne."
He hesitated in his step, and looked back; giving her a brief nod before disappearing down the hall. Lying down on her cold bench, Vic decided that she probably wouldn't wait for that pillow. Staying awake for that would give her too much time to ponder what just happened; and even with her previous nap, she was still exhausted. Supporting her head with newly freed arms, she closed her eyes. Sleep then slowly claimed her,

plunging her into a nightmare clouded with sand.

Just a few moments more of consciousness would have given her the sight of Zaynne returning back up the cell block, violet cushion in hand.

End
file.